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## A Phenomenology of Homelessness: Hannah Arendt in Conversation with the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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# Bard

A Phenomenology of Homelessness:  
Hannah Arendt in Conversation with the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by

Zelda May S. Bas

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2016

“Under the most diverse conditions and disparate circumstances, we watch the development of the same phenomena – homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth.”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

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To my family,  
*for everything*

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## Preface

When people ask me where my home is, I always have a difficult time answering the question. Paris? Lyon? New York? Madrid? Having been brought up between Europe and the United States, with a French parent on one side of the Atlantic, and an American parent on the other, multiple cities I have had homes in come to my mind. Between visits to my German and Albanian grandparents and Alsatian and Turkish great-grandparents, my life has been spent immersed in a landscape of different places, languages, cultures, and traditions - all of which have made me feel at home. Although I have always been aware of my somewhat eclectic upbringing and heritage, it was not until I found myself walking in a refugee camp in the West Bank, after my freshman year of college, that I fully understood what a formative role my upbringing and heritage have played in providing me with such a strong sense of grounding.

The walls of the narrow and winding streets of the camp were covered in layers of fading graffiti that read ‘peace’ in multiple languages, and it felt as though I were eerily trapped in a labyrinth. I vividly remember the words of the young Palestinian man guiding our group, “This is where I live, but it doesn’t feel like home. I’m a refugee. I’ve lost my home and I don’t know when I’ll get it back.” I was baffled by the fact that a person could have such a dispossessed sense of home, and thereby be essentially ‘rootless’; for in contrast to my life, my sense of home had rarely been challenged. His words ignited within me a fascination with the complexities of conceptions of ‘home’ and ‘homelessness’, and their relationship with the phenomenon of displacement. This project was inspired by these questions and my recent visit to a Syrian refugee camp in Germany.

## Introduction

When Elliot Liebow interviewed Sarah for his book *Tell Them Who I am*, Sarah was homeless and living in a shelter. In one of their conversations, she told him that the hardest part about being homeless was not being able to decide what to do “because it doesn’t matter what you do. You’re not needed anywhere, not wanted anywhere, and not expected anywhere.” (Liebow 30). For Bernice, who was also homeless at the time, the most difficult part about being homeless was people treating her as if she “had a communicable disease.” (Liebow 217). Shirley, another homeless woman, told Liebow how challenging it was to feel like she had gone from being “a productive and respected citizen [...] to dirt” (Liebow 217). *Tell Them Who I Am* goes beyond homelessness as the loss of home in the sense of a roof over one’s head and reveals its deep complexities: powerlessness “in law and fact” (Liebow 120); a loss of “connectedness to others” (Liebow 51); “feelings of loneliness” (Liebow 151); and being reduced to a “citizen of the street” (Liebow 116) that is not recognized as “fully human” (Liebow 21) by the rest of society. In other words, homelessness is a life devoid of a place to call home, but also of a spiritual home made up of ties to others, purpose, and dignity. This project is an effort to push past the prototypical ideas of homelessness and establish a more complex understanding of it. For this, I seek to determine the origins of homelessness. The intention behind a phenomenological approach is to study how homelessness appears and the way it is given in experience.

In her book *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*, philosopher Simone Weil argues, “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (43). Yet, we live in a time when more and more people are rootless. Human beings, Weil argues, are rooted “by virtue of [their] real, active and natural participation in the life of a community” (43) - in other words, people strikes roots through their



natural membership and engagement in a community of other rooted people. This however, is compromised by the modern condition of “uprootedness” (Weil 41) resulting from the social, cultural and spiritual malaise that plagues the twentieth century. The danger of this condition is that it manifests itself through more than just geographical uprootedness, as it does also through spiritual uprootedness (Weil 45). When people become uprooted, they lose not only the physical attachments to their environment, but also their spiritual connections to others, to the past and to their places in the world at large.

This idea that homelessness stems from a form of spiritual uprooting bridges Liebow’s anthropological and sociological approach to homelessness with Weil’s philosophical approach to it, and indicates that the phenomenon of homelessness is far more complex than the loss of a roof over one’s head, as it has a more profound existential dimension to it as well. Human beings need geographic ties to a physical dwelling, but also, and perhaps more importantly, we need spiritual ties to particular traditions, habits and practices that make up our sense of belonging.

If homelessness is to have no place to call home - to be unwanted, to have a communicable disease, to lose a community - then homelessness is at the core of what the twentieth century political thinker Hannah Arendt calls “superfluousness” (475). For Arendt, superfluousness is tied to ‘isolation’, ‘loneliness’ and ‘uprootedness’. These are essential concepts for her because they set up a modern phenomenon which presents human beings in the modern age as being cut off from the traditional markers and authorities that give their lives meanings (such as religion, membership in a community, traditions etc). Having lost these experiences of being rooted, modern men are adrift in the world. When human beings are isolated - which is so say that they are powerless due to there being no one to act with (Arendt 474) - they become lonely. Loneliness is to feel abandoned and “deserted by all human companionship” (Arendt 474).

Combined, isolation and loneliness lead to uprootedness, which is the “loss of a place in the world recognized and guaranteed by others” (Arendt 475). The danger of this modern experience of uprootedness is its power to make human beings superfluous, “to not belong to the world at all.” (Arendt 475).

What does Arendt mean by not belonging to the world? In *The Human Condition* she defines the world as, “the man-made home erected on earth and made of the material which earthly nature delivers into human hands, consists not of things that are consumed but of things that are used.” (134). As human beings we build homes for ourselves by using the materials provided to us by nature and earth. These ‘things’, which we build our place in the world with, are durable; they give our homes permanence and our lives meaning. When one does not belong to the world they are not “at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human.” (Arendt 135). Here, the durability of the materials we construct our homes with stands in opposition to the nature of human life, which is fleeting and impermanent. One basic quality of human being is our ability to artificially construct a human world. This freedom to make a world is evidence of human spontaneity - or what Arendt refers to as man’s capacity for “beginning” (Arendt *Origins* 479). To not belong to the world is to be deprived of a home that provides the conditions for a stable life, and refuge for our humanness. It is to be shorn from the human activity of creating the world in which we live. To be homeless is to be deprived of human freedom. That Arendt sets homelessness at the heart of her thinking makes manifest the deep connection between homelessness and the loss of human freedom that threatens our time.

This project is first of all an effort to establish a phenomenology of homelessness in conversation with Hannah Arendt’s thinking in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In

parallel to this, it is also an exploration of what Arendt meant when she predicted that refugees would become “the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics” (227). The project is twofold, as it seeks to understand the phenomenon of homelessness by studying its origins, and then considers to what extent we can speak of homelessness in relation to refugees. I argue that the phenomenon of homelessness has three origins: rightlessness, spiritual disconnectedness, and political invisibility.

In chapter one of this project I argue that homelessness originates from rightlessness. For this I turn to Arendt’s analysis of the stateless people. The uniqueness of Arendt’s account of statelessness is her insight that statelessness was tied to the breakdown of the European liberal and legalistic nation-state structure, which created a hierarchy of citizens based on nationality and race, and left people who were members of other national minorities rightless. This chapter begins by presenting the nation-state’s exclusion of minorities and refugees post World War I as having paved the way for the exclusion in extremis of the stateless. Next, the chapter looks at the ways in which the nation-state not only denied the stateless the basic political status of being a person, but also produced people who had nowhere to go and were accepted nowhere. The chapter then moves onto what made statelessness an ‘unprecedented phenomenon’, namely, the stateless people’s loss of human rights.

In chapter two of this project I argue that homelessness originates from spiritual disconnectedness. For this I turn to Arendt’s analysis of ‘the masses’. The masses were large numbers of unaffiliated and lonely citizens who, in moments of totalitarian governance, swung the political tide. Although they were not rightless like the stateless, they felt spiritually disconnectedness, or what Arendt calls “metaphysical rootlessness” (236). This chapter begins by looking at the collapse of the European class system after World War I - which until then had

provided people with a sense of belonging and purpose - as the context in which the masses' spiritual disconnectedness emerged. With no class to define social status and to provide connections to others, individuals suffered an existential crisis and turned into large structureless, disinterested, apolitical, and lonely masses. Next, the chapter pinpoints the erosion of authority as the underlying cause of a general spiritual disconnectedness. In fact, the masses were not the only ones to feel lost in response to this break in tradition; other groups of people adrift and seeking meaning started to mushroom. The chapter then moves onto totalitarian movements appealing to the masses on the basis of what I call a 'fictitious home'. Totalitarian movements were well aware of the overwhelming feeling of disconnectedness that permeated society and manipulated their propaganda so as to give the masses the illusion of a place in the world.

In chapter three of this project I argue that homelessness originates from political invisibility. For this I turn to three groups Arendt writes about as being indicative of the dangers of living outside of the public world: the Jews, the Boers, and the tribal nations of Europe. The chapter begins by establishing the importance, for Arendt, of public life, and how appearing in public provides human being with a home in the world. The chapter then presents a case study of the Jews who never built homes that had a political reality, and instead, established roots only in the private sphere. Next, the chapter moves onto a case study of the tribal nations of Europe. These were the pan movements made up of people who did not obtain the sovereignty of a nation-state because they never developed roots beyond their common ethnic consciousness. With no political institutions or enduring cultural achievements that they could claim, pan movements proclaimed their innate superiority on mystical bases, which rejected other's claim to human dignity and made it impossible to build a common world. The chapter then looks at the Boers

who led their lives completely divorced from the public sphere, by isolating themselves and never working to produce anything of their own making.

Hannah Arendt predicted that the stateless - whose condition she believed to be identical to that of refugees (279) - in particular would become “the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics.” (277). Contemporary politics, Arendt argues, are marked by the discrepancy between human rights being inalienable and enjoyed only by citizens belonging to a state, and the situation of displaced people, who lose the protection of their rights (Arendt 279) because they have no legal rights as citizens. If contemporary politics are characterized by this human rights paradox that leaves those who do not belong to a political community homeless, then displaced people are indeed symptomatic of them. Devoid of a place to call home, shorn of rights, cut off from ties to others, and denied a political identity, displaced people become homeless; and the roughly fifty-nine point five million forcibly displaced people in the world today (UNHCR) are a clear indication of the overwhelming homelessness of our age.

In chapter four of this project I argue that refugee camps are spatial manifestations of homelessness. Moreover, I argue that camps are a solution to the refugee problem that does not change refugees’ homeless condition; in fact, refugee camps leave it in limbo. The chapter begins by placing the emergence of refugee camps within the larger history of camps as modern spaces of confinement for bothersome populations who do not fit the framework of the law. Next the chapter moves onto the key characteristics of refugee camps and how these mirror the tripartite origins of homelessness. Refugee camps are spaces of exception that are geographically marginalized. Completely isolated, they are excluded from the normal order and deprived of public and private spaces. The chapter then looks at different architectural attempts at challenging the homelessness of refugee camps.

My reflections on homelessness were inspired primarily by my visit to one of Germany's main refugee camps, the Lebach refugee camp in the region of Saar, in January 2016. As of today over two thousand four hundred refugees live in Lebach. The majority are Syrians fleeing the Assad regime and Daesh. Listening to the numerous Syrians I interviewed, I was struck by their absolute dispossession. To confront a Syrian refugee today is to confront homelessness and all its complexities. Since the Syrian civil war erupted five years ago, approximately nine million Syrians have fled their homes to seek refuge (UNHCR). Over four million have fled to neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and an estimated seven point six million remain displaced within Syria (UNHCR). The mass exodus of Syrians over the last few years has unleashed the worst crisis of forced displacement since World War II. Arendt's claim that, "we watch the development of the same phenomena - homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth." (Arendt viii) is increasingly vindicated as we witness human waves of Syrian refugees.

## Chapter I

### *The loss of rights: the homeless stateless people*

“The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion [...] but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them [...].”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

In a letter to Hannah Arendt regarding *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Karl Jaspers writes, “I’m more convinced than ever that this book, conclusively developed out of your clarity of visions, represents a major breakthrough for our political world” (Arendt et al. 273). Written on the heels of the war and with eminent scholarship, Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* has become a landmark in our understanding of the barbarity of the twentieth century. Although the book as a whole is renowned, one chapter in particular has received wide spread attention and become a reference across fields. This is chapter nine, “The Decline of the Nation State, and the End of the Rights of Man”.

In this chapter of the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt produces “the most powerful set of reflections on statelessness” (Kerber 728) ever written. Through her analysis of statelessness, she observes that “ ‘the rights’ of man proved to be illusionary, when in the interwar period, European states were forced to deal with refugees who had been deprived of their citizenship *en masse*.” (Schaap 22). Arendt herself was stateless<sup>1</sup> from 1933 when she fled Germany, to 1951 when she became a US citizen. Her personal experience of statelessness deeply influenced her writing and propelled her not only to find answers to a pivotal time in history, but also to understand how totalitarianism had been able to render her and so many others rightless.

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<sup>1</sup> Her affidavit of identity in lieu of passport reads, “I am a former citizen of Germany and at present stateless”.

The power of Arendt's study of statelessness also lies in her unique insight that statelessness was tied to fundamental characteristics of the European nation-state system. A nation-state is a hybrid entity that claims territorial integrity as well as a specific national identity (Xenos 423). Arendt saw the rise of statelessness as coinciding with the collapse of this ambiguous nation-state into a national state that created a hierarchy of citizens based on nationality and race. Such a hierarchy excluded members of other national minorities and eventually left them rightless. Against what Arendt takes to be the pluralist and legalistic foundations of political equality underlying a modern state, she argues that the breakdown of the state through the rise of the nation-state led to the latter's "sovereign power to exclude" (Hayden 249) and therefore, to determine who had rights and who did not. This is why Arendt argues that statelessness was "the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history, and the existence of an ever-growing new people comprised of stateless persons, the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics." (Arendt 277). Statelessness came out of the nation-state's exclusionist *modus operandi*.

In this chapter I argue that homelessness originates from rightlessness. For this I turn to Arendt's analysis of the stateless people. This chapter begins by presenting the nation-state's exclusion of minorities and refugees post World War I as having paved the way for the exclusion in extremis of the stateless. Next, the chapter looks at the ways in which the nation-state not only denied the stateless the basic political status of being a person, but also produced people who had nowhere to go and were accepted nowhere. The chapter then moves onto what made statelessness an 'unprecedented phenomenon', namely, the stateless people's loss of human rights. Without legal rights as citizens of a state, the stateless no longer had the ability to create a home anywhere in the world.



### ***1. Historical context***

To understand statelessness one must begin by looking at the historical context in which it was born. Historical grounding is key in understanding statelessness, as Arendt argues that it epitomizes the twentieth century - “an era not only of world wars but also of nation-states in flux, newly forming, collapsing, and being reconfigured.” (Rürup 115). Arendt identifies the aftermath of World War I as the historical catalyst for statelessness; more specifically, the civil wars and revolutions that resulted from the crumbling of multinational states. Out of this chaos came massive migrations of groups comprised of minorities and refugees. These groups came to create a major citizenship and nationality problem, as they had lost their formal state affiliation (Rürup 113) and were left wandering.

To regulate this problem, the Peace Treaties established nation-states by grouping people into single states. The Treaties designated some as “ ‘state people’ ” (Arendt 270) that would be in charge of government. Others were “silently assumed” (Arendt 270) to be equal to the ‘state people’<sup>2</sup>, and finally, a third group of nationalities was defined as “ ‘the minorities’ ” (Arendt 270). Arendt is critical of the Peace Treaties’ solution because the nation-state structure signaled a change in the state going from an instrument of the law, to an instrument of the nation (Arendt 275). This is to say that the state as a provider of equality for every individual was replaced by the nation’s protection of those with the same national origin only. This method revealed itself to be inadequate, as it conflicted with Europe’s demographic map at the time, which was composed of minorities representing up to thirty percent of the inhabitants in some succession states (271). Consequently, minorities and refugees whose states were not conceded were marginalized. They

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<sup>2</sup> Arendt gives the examples of the Slovaks in Czechoslovakia and the Croats and Slovenes in Yugoslavia

transcended national boundaries, which left them outside of the modern national framework (Rürup 114) and made them anomalies.

The Minority Treaties were created alongside the Peace Treaties as a response to the large numbers of people who did not fit the nation-state model because they were not “nationals” (Arendt 275). The Minority Treaties were created to safeguard the rights of these marginalized populations and make it illegal to oppress or kill them (Arendt 272), however, they quickly became problematic. The Treaties were met with contempt by minorities, as they further isolated them and reinforced the idea that “only nationals could be citizens” (Arendt 275). Because they did not share the dominant national origins, minorities could not benefit from the same protection of legal institutions. They saw the Minority Treaties as a form of discrimination reminding them that they “needed some law of exception until they were completely assimilated and divorced from their origin.” (Arendt 275).

For Arendt, the Treaties’ true intentions were “a painless and human method of assimilation” (275), indicating that the protection of minorities was meant to be only temporary. The goal of the statesmen who were behind the Treaties, she argues, was to protect minorities *until* they were either assimilated or liquidated, which were seen as the only two ways to resolve the minority issue (272). These intentions were implicitly in line with the nation-state’s motives, namely, to eliminate diversity in favor of “homogeneity of population and rootedness in the soil.” (Arendt 270).

Although the Minority Treaties marginalized minorities and treated them as exceptions, Arendt brings our attention to the fact that minorities were only “half stateless” (276), as they still belonged to a political body. The existence of such treaties meant that minorities had certain rights and protections, and were therefore still part of a legal framework. Statelessness per se was

born only when states decided that the Minority Treaties were impracticable and turned to denationalization to get rid of minorities, and washed their hands of refugees by ignoring the right of asylum.

Arendt's analysis of the Minority Treaties shows that what was arguably the first international attempt at guaranteeing human rights turned out to be a colossal failure (Parekh 14). The failure of the Minority Treaties reflected the international community's incapacity to deal with the minority problem adequately. More importantly, it also revealed the nation-state's increasing biopolitical power. By deciding that certain people belonged to the nation-state and others did not, and by treating the latter as outsiders, the nation-state developed the "sovereign power to exclude" (Hayden 249). The rise of the nation-state within the post World War I context marked the beginning of severe politics of exclusion.

## ***2. Politics of exclusion***

As Patrick Hayden observes in his analysis of statelessness, "The full implications of the sovereign power to exclude persons from political community became apparent when European governments began to denationalize large segments of the population (...)" (254). The "mass denationalizations" (Arendt 278) that removed specific people from organized political communities left large portions of populations with "no country on earth in which they enjoyed the right to residence." (Arendt 276). For Arendt, denationalization was a profoundly "sinister" (280) measure because it was carried out in "in all innocence" (280), based on the "sacrosanct sovereign right to protect national interests" (Hayden 254). Denationalization explicitly reflected the nation-state's implicit intolerance for different views, and the idea that whoever was different had to be kept out. Arendt provides an extensive list of countries that resorted to denationalization, such as Portugal with a decree in 1916 that automatically denaturalized

anyone born of a German father, or Italy where, starting in 1926, anyone could be denaturalized if they were seen as “not worthy of citizenship” (Arendt 279). The fact that denationalization became a common practice even in democratic states is strongly criticized by Arendt who is tempted to argue that the extent to which governments used denationalization is an indicator of “totalitarian infection” (278). Measures such as denationalization meant that the nation-state had the sovereignty to take certain people’s legal status away and alienate them.

Also reflecting the sovereign power to exclude were states’ blatant disregard for the right of asylum, which had always been understood “as a symbol of the Right of Man” (Arendt 280) rooted in hospitality. The word ‘asylum’ comes from their word for inviolable (Bazelon 19), and since ancient times the right of asylum provided refuge, protection and sanctuary to exiles. Going back to the Greeks, the history of asylum allowed slaves who ran away from abusive masters and even some criminals to seek sanctuary in certain temples. Because the right of asylum entailed taking in people from other states, it profoundly conflicted with “the international rights of nation-states” (Arendt 280). Consequently, what had always been understood as an inviolable right eroded and was absent from all written law, constitutions and international agreements.

Miriam Rürup’s analysis of the stateless offers two additional measures that reflected the nation-state’s politics of exclusion. The first pertained to women specifically. In international law until 1957, women’s nationality was “based on the principle of ‘derivative citizenship’ ” (Rürup 119). This meant that their nationality was dependent on their father or their husband’s nationality. States took advantage of this and many women who were married to foreign nationals saw their nationality automatically revoked (Rürup 119). The second measure pertained to children specifically. Due to “inconsistent laws concerning the nationality of children born to foreign or naturalized citizens.” (Rürup 120), even if a child’s parents were naturalized,

nationality laws did not always ensure that nationality was automatically passed to their children. If parents did not have valid papers, had lost their nationalities, or came from different countries, “children could be born into statelessness.” (Rürup 120). These two measures, alongside denationalization and disregard for the right of asylum, allowed states to wash their hands of the problematic minorities and refugees who did not fit the nation-state’s nationality laws. Deprived of a place in an organized political body, the people that were excluded became stateless.

The stateless were “stubborn [...] and much more far-reaching in consequence” (Arendt 276) than minorities because they became a nuisance to everyone, as opposed to minorities who were a nuisance only to the state they lived in. Because they belonged nowhere, the stateless were everybody and nobody’s problem at the same time - they “were received as scum of the earth everywhere” (Arendt 269). Refugees who were forced out of their countries, and either denationalized or denied the right of asylum, joined the stateless in legal status. Arendt makes the claim that “the core of statelessness [...] is identical with refugee question” (279). Refugees had lost the protection of their home government and did not belong to the country they fled to. In this regard, both stateless people and refugees were deprived of the rights and protections afforded by citizenship (Hayden 256) and left outside the “pale of the law” (Arendt 277).

The existence of people who belonged nowhere and were received nowhere was something that had never been observed before. For the first time, “the rules of the world” (Arendt 267) suddenly ceased to apply to masses of people. Arendt’s use of a semantic field of novelty when she writes about the stateless illustrates the unprecedented characteristic of statelessness: “whose sufferings were different from those of all others in the era between wars” (268), “a new element of disintegration” (269), “the newest mass phenomenon” (277), “new people” (277), “new and

unforeseen”(278) etc. Stuck in a state of limbo, with no government protection and absolutely no place to go, the stateless “were welcomed nowhere and could be assimilated nowhere.” (Arendt 267). They differed from all previous migration groups not because they had lost their homes, “but [because of] the impossibility of finding a new one” (Arendt 293). The gravity of statelessness was not so much that the stateless lost a particular place, but rather that they “no longer belonged to a community whatsoever” (Arendt 295).

The failure of the “only two ways to solve the problem” (Arendt 281) of statelessness, repatriation and naturalization, further emphasized the uniqueness of this condition namely, that the stateless were a mass phenomenon of people who belonged nowhere and had nowhere to go. Repatriation was unsuccessful because there was no place to repatriate the stateless to. The country of origin that had expelled the person who had become stateless did not accept them, and neither did any other state. With nowhere to return to, the stateless were essentially “undeportab[le]” (Arendt 283). However, this did not prevent states from trying to get rid of the unwanted stateless anyway. This task was handed over to the police who illegally expelled the stateless by smuggling them into neighboring countries. As for naturalization, it was “restrictively offered to a small number of individuals and persistently susceptible to revocation” (Hayden 255), which made it an inadequate solution when naturalization demands emerged *en masse*. Moreover, naturalization went against the nation-state’s legislation that recognized only those born in its territory or citizens by birth.

Although statelessness was an unprecedented phenomenon, it certainly was not accidental. In fact, Arendt’s analysis of statelessness shows that the phenomenon has a clear history. Step by step, the formation of the nation-state, followed by the Minority Treaties, denationalization and the disregard of the right of asylum, *produced* statelessness. Moreover, it is important to note that

remedies to statelessness existed, but these were deliberately ignored and made ineffective by states in order to protect national interests. It is precisely for this reason that Arendt refutes the “material problem of overpopulation” (294) excuse for statelessness, and argues that the stateless peoples’ expulsion from the nation-state was strictly a “political organization” (294) problem.

### ***3. Loss of the Rights of Man***

The sovereign power to exclude had severe consequences on the doctrine of human rights. The change in the state’s function as a provider of equal rights for all, to a provider of equal rights for those who were nationals only meant that the stateless were essentially “rightless” (293). To understand the conflict between the condition of statelessness and human rights, it is helpful to turn to Arendt’s explanation of the paradox that came to light at the very birth of the modern nation-state. This is when “the French Revolution combined the declaration of the Rights of Man with the demand for national sovereignty.” (Arendt 230). These Rights of Man, which were “the inalienable heritage of all human beings” (Arendt 230), were also claimed to be the “specific heritage of specific nations” (Arendt 230). Human rights were therefore guaranteed only as national rights. More importantly, this meant that a nation was therefore subject to the laws of the Right of Man *and* sovereign - “Man himself was their source as well as their ultimate goal.” (Arendt 291). It is here that Arendt sees the fundamental “paradox” (291) of human rights.

This paradox only became evident with the emergence of the stateless who, because they had been excluded from the polity and therefore lost their rights as citizens of a state, lost their human rights as well. With the Rights of Man being declared as inalienable and therefore independent of government, the humanity of the stateless revealed itself insufficient as a base for human rights. There was no authority to protect the stateless, as the state’s role was to “grant full

civil and political rights only to those who belonged to the national community by right of origin and fact of birth.” (Arendt 230).

Arendt expresses the consequences of being rightless through an enumeration of losses. She begins with the loss of the home, which she understands as “the entire social texture” (293) into which the rightless were born and in which they established a distinct place in the world for themselves. In her essay *We Refugees*, Arendt lists the different elements that comprised this social texture that was also lost by refugees after World War II: the home, which she equates with “the familiarity of daily life” (110); an occupation, which she equates with “the confidence [of being] of some use in this world” (110); and finally, a language, which she equates with “the naturalness of reactions” (Arendt 110). Deprived of rights, the rightless lost the environment that they constructed with others and from which they derived roots.

In addition to the loss of this social structure, the rightless lost their government’s protection as well as the protection of other governments. Once they had been “thrown out of one of these tightly organized closed communities [they] found [themselves] thrown out of the family of nations altogether.” (Arendt 294). The rightless were an “anomaly for whom the general law did not provide” (286). Incapable of providing laws for those who had lost all government protection, the nation-state handed the matter over to the police. As the number of stateless and refugees living in conditions of rightlessness grew, the more “unrestricted and arbitrary” (Arendt 288) power the police gained. The amount of authority given to the police to handle the problem of statelessness marked the first time in Western Europe that the police acted on its own (Arendt 287). In this regard, the police underwent a change similar to the one the state did, as it went from being “an instrument to carry out and enforce the law” of the state (Arendt 287) to an independent authority that ruled directly over certain people.



Beyond the right to a roof over one's head, an occupation, a language and government protection, there is a right Arendt recognizes as having "a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective." (296). To have a place in the world is to be part of "the man-made home erected on earth and made of the material which earthly nature delivers into human hands, consists not of things that are consumed but of things that are used." (Arendt 134). As human beings we build homes for ourselves by using the materials provided to us by nature and earth. These 'things', which we build our place in the world with, are durable; they give our homes permanence and our lives meaning. When one does not belong to the world they are not "at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human." (Arendt 135). Here, the durability of the materials we construct our homes with stands in opposition to the nature of human life, which is fleeting and impermanent. One basic quality of human being is our ability to artificially construct a human world. This freedom to make a world is evidence of human spontaneity - or what Arendt refers to as man's capacity for "beginning" (Arendt *Origins* 479). To not belong to the world is to be deprived of a home that provides the conditions for a stable life, and refuge for our humanness. It is to be shorn from the human activity of creating the world in which we live.

This is why Arendt believes that the most basic right of a human being should be "the right to have rights" (296) namely, the right to belong to a community that guarantees a person equal status independent of human plurality and regardless of citizenship and nationality. By losing their rights, the stateless had no way to find their way back into a world of fellowship and purpose (Arendt 189) and could no longer be at home anywhere in the world.

## Chapter II

### *Spiritual disconnectedness: the homeless mass man*

“The truth is that the masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal relationships.”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Hannah Arendt's analysis of statelessness supports Liebow and Weil's understanding of homelessness as more than the loss of a particular place to call home. At the core of statelessness is the loss of place in the world, as to be stateless is to be deprived of the right to be at home anywhere. Two crucial concepts of Arendt's that relate to her thinking about statelessness are “uprootedness” (475) and “isolation” (474). Having lost their rights, the stateless were isolated from the world of human fellowship and therefore, uprooted, which is to have “no place in the world” (Arendt 475). One of the key elements of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism is that totalitarian regimes could not exist without isolating people.

Totalitarian regimes' unique characteristic though is their dissatisfaction with men being simply isolated. Totalitarianism goes further by also “bas[ing] itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all” (Arendt 475). To be lonely is to feel abandoned and “deserted by all human companionship” (Arendt 474). Loneliness is precisely what characterized ‘the masses’, the large numbers of unaffiliated and disconnected citizens who, in moments of totalitarian governance, swung the political tide. How do individuals become lonely masses? To answer this question Arendt looks at the masses as a phenomenon of catastrophic upheaval through war, revolution and economic collapse.

The fact that these are the same conditions in which statelessness emerged cannot be ignored. In the case of the stateless, war, revolution and economic collapse coincided with the consolidation of the nation-state, which, as we saw, led those who did not fit the nation-state's nationality laws to be rightless. Contrary to the stateless, the masses who were not minorities or refugees, were at home within the nation-state. In the case of the masses, war, revolution and economic collapse coincided with the breakdown of the class system, which had provided people with a sense of belonging and fellowship. This breakdown left the masses feeling lost and spiritually disconnected. Whereas the stateless experienced homelessness as a form of isolation, the masses experienced it as a form of unbearable loneliness, or what Arendt calls "metaphysical rootlessness" (Arendt 236).

In chapter two of this project I argue that homelessness originates from spiritual disconnectedness. For this I turn to Arendt's analysis of 'the masses'. This chapter begins by looking at the collapse of the European class system after World War I - which until then had provided people with a sense of belonging and purpose - as the context in which the masses' spiritual disconnectedness emerged. With no class to define social status and to provide connections to others, individuals suffered an existential crisis and turned into large structureless, disinterested, apolitical, and lonely masses. Next, the chapter pinpoints the erosion of authority as the underlying cause of a general spiritual disconnectedness. In fact, the masses were not the only ones to feel lost in response to this break in tradition; other groups of people adrift and seeking meaning started to mushroom. The chapter then moves onto totalitarian movements appealing to the masses on the basis of what I call a 'fictitious home'. Totalitarian movements were well aware of the overwhelming feeling of disconnectedness that permeated society and manipulated their propaganda so as to give the masses the illusion of a place in the world.

### ***1. Collapse of the European class system and birth of the masses***

The collapse of the European class system during the nineteen twenties and thirties had a great impact on the development of the masses. In Germany for instance, Arendt quotes William Ebenstein who writes that the breakdown was, “ ‘one of the most dramatic events in recent German history’ ” (313). In his analysis of the masses, Peter Baehr argues that the masses emerged within two different contexts. The first was the turmoil that followed World War I, which was a time of revolution, military defeat, economic depressions, collapsing empires, and new ethnically based states resulting in the displacement of those deemed aliens (Baehr 12). The post war “calamity” (Baehr12) was too much for the class system to handle and ended up crushing it. What came out of this general chaos were large numbers of unemployed workers, dispossessed small businessmen and people who used to belong to the middle and upper classes. It is the lumping together of these groups who had lost their ties to others that came to form the masses. After World War II, the “same dramatic event of a breakdown of the class system repeated itself in almost all European countries.” (Arendt 313). Baehr gives the example of National Socialism in Germany and Austria, which “took advantage of this crisis [to organize] masses that had been politically disenfranchised and economically emasculated in the inter-war years.” (13) These masses of broken up individuals craving to be part of something again became the “basis” (Baehr 13) of the Nazi dictatorship, and later, of totalitarian rule.

The second context was the artificially created breakdown of the class system by Stalin. Stalin came to power wanting to rule over masses of distraught people so that he could easily rally and manipulate them. In order to do so, he destroyed all the existing social stratifications that had been previously installed by Lenin. Stalin intentionally atomized people with policies aimed at “pulverizing all groups and factions that were independent of the state.” (Baehr 13) His first step

was to decimate all former communal institutions, which was then followed by the liquidation of the classes and of the bureaucracy that had helped with the previous liquidation measures (Arendt 321). Stalin's fabrication of an atomized society "[prepared] the country for totalitarian government." (Baehr 13) and transformed "the slumbering majorities behind all parties into one great, unorganized, structureless mass" (Arendt 315). In Europe, the rise of the masses was *unintended*, whereas it was carefully *planned* in Russia. In both cases however, it was social atomization that led large numbers of individuals to be cut off from others and lose a sense of belonging.

To understand how the collapse of the class system left people adrift, it is helpful to look at the ways in which it had provided people with a sense of fellowship and purpose. Until its collapse, the class system had been a solid and consistent feature of society (Canovan 408). It acted as a stabilizing force by upholding a structure and order. Through "social membership" (Baehr 12), the class system gave individuals a specific place in society and therefore, an identity. Those who were part of the class system were "interest-bound" (Baehr 12), or as Arendt writes, "held together by a consciousness of common interest" (Arendt 311). Classes were formations of like-minded people with a "class articulateness" (Arendt 311), which is to say that they had developed an awareness of themselves as a class, with a shared identity, collective history, group trajectory, and common objectives. The class system allowed people to be engaged and make decisions pertaining to the common interests of their class and therefore, to have a sense of purpose and meaning. Members of the class system were "citizens with opinions about, and interests in, the handling of public affairs" (Arendt 309). When the breakdown of the class system occurred, relationships between people with a common identity and place in the world were severed. What individuals had taken to be a rooted place in society no longer meant

anything, as everything people had built through a common social understanding with others fell apart.

The spiritual disconnectedness of the masses emerged in this “atmosphere” (Arendt 315) of the breakdown of class society. Class members went from being individuals connected through a social structure, to “one great unorganized, structureless mass of furious individuals” (Arendt 315). As the entire social structure fell apart, anxiety, anger and cynicism started to amount (McCarthy 44). Social calamity and mass unemployment touched “individuals of *all* social and intellectual persuasions” (Baehr 13). The majorities behind the no longer existing classes dissolved into a distressed and dissatisfied mass. The standards and attitudes of the masses never reflected those of the dominating class but instead, were a perversion of the standards and attitudes of all classes (Arendt 314). This meant that there was no cohesive system of ideas and ideals uniting the masses. The shared experience of despair and disconnectedness was the only thing that held the masses together. More importantly, it meant that a certain individualism had completely disappeared.

This lack of individualism was characteristic of the masses’ self-abandonment, or what Arendt refers to as their ‘selflessness’, which was accompanied by “bitterness” (Arendt 315) and “indifference” (Arendt 316). Arendt provides a specific definition of selflessness within the context of the masses: “Selflessness in the sense that oneself does not matter, the feeling of being expendable” (315). With no class to be a part of and engage in, the masses felt as though they had become useless. Their loss of purpose turned into a profound indifference. If there no longer was a social status or fellowship to be gained, then everything was incoherent and empty. The masses’ mentality was plagued by “bored indifference” (Arendt 316). For Arendt, the indifference and loss of self-interest that characterized the masses was extremely “disturbing”

(307) for it indicated a complete lack of care for essentially everything: the masses showed indifference “in the fact of death”, a “passionate inclination toward the most abstract notions as guides for life”, and a “general contempt for even the most obvious rules of common sense.” (Arendt 316). The masses became representative of a complete loss of “integrity” (McCarthy 45) and faith. The world was no longer a place they could derive meaning from or be active creators of meaning in. This extreme passivity, lack of hope, common set of ideals and beliefs turned the masses into “robots” (Arendt 363) that disregarded not only others’ lives, but their own as well. The rise of the mass man Arendt writes, was something that had been predicted by European scholars and statesmen starting in the early nineteenth century but these predictions were somewhat discredited by the masses’ unimaginable radical loss of self-interest (Arendt 316). The masses, like the stateless, were a new phenomenon.

Another key characteristic of the masses, which Arendt connects to their indifference was their apolitical character. The masses were indifferent people whom all other parties had given up and as a result, “the majority of [the masses’] membership consisted of people who never before had appeared on the political scene.” (Arendt 312). This point is confusing at first. If the masses regrouped people who used to belong to the class system, which we said earlier was made up of “citizens with opinions about, and interests in, the handling of public affairs” (Arendt 309), then how could they be apolitical? Arendt provides clarifications when she explains that certain members of the class system were educated, trained and paid for politics as a *job* (Arendt 314). As a result, the majority of people “remained outside all party or other political organization” (Arendt 314) and left it up to those who, in a way, were ‘specialists’ in politics. Because people of the class system relied on these few members to represent them in the political world, they never felt the need to become political actors themselves. Their lack of political interest and

engagement indicates that they did not feel responsible for what happened in the public world (Arendt 314) and therefore, when the class system broke down, the great majority of those who became the masses had no political experience. The key point is that some members of the class system were involved, and simultaneously the majority was not. The masses were the huge numbers who typically sat out of politics. The combination of the masses' selflessness and apolitical character led to utter loneliness.

Loneliness is "the painful sense of exclusion from the work of the world and from the intercourse of human fellowship." (McCarthy 47) and what is unbearable about it is "the loss of one's self" (Arendt 477). Because the masses were those individuals who never got involved in politics, they did not experience the meaningful coming together of people in public life to listen, speak and act amongst others. Instead, the masses established only social ties based on mutual economic interests and concerns, which, when the social structure of the class system broke down, were too weak to remain. Arendt insists on the fact that the chief characteristic of the mass man was not his backwardness but "his isolation and lack of social relationship." (317). The collapse of the class system did not turn masses into brutes but into spiritually disconnected people who lost a sense of reality, something that depends upon interactions with others that can validate our belonging to a common world (Baehr 15). The masses lost personal meaning, their connections to others and to the world; they felt "abandoned by everything and everyone" (McCarthy 46).

## ***2. The erosion of authority***

Although the masses were a product of catastrophic upheaval through war, revolution and economic collapse, a deeper underlying crisis also played a role in their birth, but more importantly, in the propagation of a general feeling of spiritual disconnectedness. This crisis is



the erosion of authority, or what Arendt calls the ‘break in tradition’, not only in politics, but also in Western religion and morality. It is important to note that totalitarian movements did not create this crisis of authority; they simply took advantage of the fact that people were suddenly undergoing an existential crisis and craved consistency, meaning and a sense of home.

An important component of Arendt’s writing on the masses is the contrast she establishes between the masses, the mob, the elite (intellectuals and artists) and the bourgeoisie (also referred to as “philistines”). Although these groups were different from the masses, they too felt spiritually disconnected. I argue that Arendt’s distinctions create nuances within the masses. Before looking at the groups she distinguishes the masses from, we turn to her essay “What is Authority?” to better understand the erosion of authority. She begins by stipulating that, “authority has vanished from the modern world.” (1), giving place to a “constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority” (1). Authority used to be rooted in the past and provide the world with “permanence and durability which human beings need precisely because they are (...) the most unstable and futile beings” (Arendt 3). Authority had been a stabilizing force that provided man, who is spontaneous by nature, with roots and a sense of belonging to the world. The loss of this guiding thread resulted in “general doubt” (Arendt 2) and uncertainty, as the beliefs and customs that created a common sense fell apart. In a world where there no longer was one truth to rely on and all the traditional banisters had disappeared, people were adrift.

In *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt*, Michael McCarthy concisely summarizes the significant moments in the decline of ancestral authority: “the emancipation of secular power from ecclesiastical authority during the Italian Renaissance; (...) the rupture of Christian unity in the Reformation; (...) the pathos of novelty that animated the scientific revolution whose leading interpreters revolted against tradition; (...)” (51). More broadly, the seventeenth century was

marked by the West's loss of a "securely anchored philosophical tradition as its guide to the past." (McCarthy 51), and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the loss of "our common belief in the unifying dogmas of Christianity and in the metaphysical and theological foundations of the moral order." (McCarthy 51). McCarthy's analysis of the "dramatic breakdown of all traditional authorities" (Arendt 1) shows the progressive erosion of everything that had been a source of truth, consistency, and common understanding. With no common political, social, moral and spiritual foundations to act as a binding force, more and more people felt disconnected. In a world of confusion and doubt, communities came to be "held together by the bonds of unexamined customs and habits [and] were no longer able to give a persuasive account of their moral and spiritual foundations." (McCarthy 51).

What follows is not intended to be an in depth study of the mob, the elite and the bourgeoisie, but rather an overview to understand how the erosion of authority affected different groups. The mob was "primarily a group in which the residue of all classes are represented" (Arendt 107). In this regard, the mob resembled the masses who were also the "detritus of all social strata" (Baehr 12). Interestingly, the mob was not only the refuse but also the "by-product of bourgeois society." (Arendt 155). It lived off the bourgeoisie's drive for expansion, in particular by trying its fortune in imperial adventures overseas (Swift 90). Linking the two together was an intriguing bond that reflected the bourgeoisie's admiration for the mob and their shared "unbridled egoism" (Canovan 41).

What differentiated the mob from the bourgeoisie though, is the fact that it was made up of individuals that were "both rootless and ruthless and who were particularly available for criminal activity." (Canovan 53). This characteristic of the mob was a direct result of its being a power hungry group that was willing to do anything to gain power (Arendt 325). Although it is often

argued that members of the bourgeoisie were the same way, they hid it behind “hypocrisy” (Canovan 41). The bourgeois, or philistine, is the person who in the midst of the ruins of his world worried only about his private security (Arendt 338). It is precisely for this reason that the selfless masses became violently hostile to bourgeois society (Swift 90). The mob’s drive for power is also what differentiated it from the masses who were only interested in “victory and success as such” (Arendt 350). The masses had no interest in the cause that may be victorious. The mob’s drive for power implied that it had interests and goals, which is precisely what we saw the masses lost when the class system broke down.

The bourgeoisie was not the only group that the mob was tied to; it also developed a “disturbing” and “curious” (Arendt 337) temporary alliance with the elite (also referred to as ‘the intellectuals’). This amalgam is explained by the fact that these strata had been the first to be eliminated from the structure of the framework of class society and to feel adrift (Arendt 337). Totalitarian movements attracted the mob and the elite alike because of their pronounced activism and use of terrorism (Arendt 331). Terrorism was appealing because it was radically different from what had been done in past revolutionary societies. It became “a kind of philosophy through which to express frustration, resentment, and blind hatred” (Arendt 332), and get recognition. The mob saw recognition as a form of fame that gave “access to history” and power (Arendt 332), which it wanted above all. In the case of the elite, the exaltation of violence was due more specifically to the fact that it stood in stark contrast to the hypocritical morality of the bourgeoisie who they hated (Canovan 55).

The erosion of authority combined with economic disaster and political impotence left the masses, the mob, the bourgeoisie and the elite with the unbearable weight of “wordlessness” (McCarthy 46). These groups felt as though they had no place in the world - what Arendt refers

to as being “superfluous” (Arendt *Origins* 475). The distinctions she makes between these groups are indicative of different attempts to escape superfluoussness. The mob did so by seeking power and terror; the bourgeoisie by protecting its private security; and the elite by creating a strategic temporary alliance with the mob who had also been one of the first groups to suffer from the class breakdown.

### **3. *The fictitious home of totalitarian movements***

The masses’ attempt to escape superfluoussnes was expressed through their attraction to totalitarian movements. This attraction was in no way the result of ignorance or brainwashing (Arendt xxiii) but rather, the result of the masses being drawn to the movements’ ability to provide what I call a ‘fictitious home’. This fictitious home was appealing, as it provided consistency. The masses were not interested in facts, but “only the consistency of the system of which they [were] presumably part.” (Arendt 351). In a world where everything seemed to be falling apart, and the whole social structure that provided people with a sense of rootedness disappeared, totalitarian movements’ consistency was a source of comfort that numbed the *angst*. Movements created consistency through the “endless repetition of a few key ideas” (Baehr 13). As the same claims were made over and over again, they appeared to be “consistent, comprehensible and predictable” (Arendt 352), which created the illusion of coherence and stability.

The masses’ acceptance of movements’ fictitious home reveals a certain “fanaticism” (Arendt 307) about the masses, which Arendt differentiates from idealism. Idealism “always springs from some individual decision and conviction and is subject to experience and argument.” (307). The masses did not make any decision for this would have implied thinking critically about what the movements claimed and as we saw earlier, the masses suffered from the “complete loss of

individual claims and ambition” (Arendt 314). As long as the organizational framework of movements was consistent, “the fanaticized members [could] be reached by neither experience nor argument” (Arendt 308). The masses’ complete identification with movements and total conformism made it so that challenging movements’ ideas - which is what Arendt means by “subject to experience and argument” - was futile. Such loyalty can be expected “only from the completely isolated human being” (Arendt 323). The masses who had lost all social ties and self-interest, saw totalitarian movements as the only way to have place in the world.

The paradox of totalitarian movements is that they operated as much on consistency as they did on impermanence. Movements could remain in power “only so long as they [kept] moving and setting everything around them in motion” (Arendt 306). This is what Arendt refers to as “the perpetual-motion mania of totalitarian movements” (Arendt 306). Needing mass support to exist, movements were always moving forward to make sure their followers remained hooked. This constant motion was exemplified by new ideas, purges, wars, deportations, and the identification of every new objective enemy to liquidate (Baehr 13). Stillness would have meant giving followers space to think about the world as it really was, which movements knew would interfere with the “fiction” (Arendt 352) they had constructed. As long as the momentum was consistent, the masses were assuaged and subdued.

The masses were not loyal to an interest but precisely to this fiction; a fiction that perfectly aligned with their longing for a “consistent, comprehensible, and predictable world” (Arendt 352). The masses could not bear the reality of their spiritual disconnectedness and “social homelessness” (Arendt 352), so they gave up common sense in order to escape it. The home provided by totalitarian movements was fictitious because it would have been impossible to fulfill the needs of the masses without seriously conflicting with common sense. As Baehr

explains, the fiction presented the world in conspiratorial terms and reduced the world to one central tenet – class or race – from which everything else was derived (13). Moreover, it could not be debated for its vindication was to be found in an indefinite future. The fictitious home created by totalitarian movements was accepted as a “functioning reality” (Arendt 364) by the masses who, shorn of a common world of meaning, craved a home and derived “their sense of having a place in the world only from [their] belonging to a movement” (Arendt 324).

### Chapter III

*Political invisibility:  
the homeless Jews, Boers and tribal nations of Europe*

In conversation with Hannah Arendt, the first two chapters of this project have established that homelessness originates both from rightlessness and spiritual disconnectedness. By studying the rightlessness of the stateless people and the spiritual disconnectedness of the masses, we find two experiences of homelessness. On the one hand, homelessness is experienced as a form of isolation, causing people to lose their place in the world. On the other hand, homelessness is experienced as a form of loneliness, causing people to feel as though they do not belong to the world at all. Although these are distinct experiences of homelessness, they present a commonality namely, the loss of meaning.

Humans derive meaning from having a place in the public sphere, “a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective” (Arendt 296). Arendt distinguishes three spheres of human life, the public, the private and the social. The public sphere is characterized by equality and constitutes the political space where everyone is equal and has the right to participate in the “human world of fellowship and purpose” (Arendt 189). The social sphere is the sphere of discrimination, which lies between the public and the private spheres. This is where people come together and form groups based on likeness and common interests (Arendt, *Reflections on Little Rock* 51). Finally, the private sphere is characterized by uniqueness. This is the space within the protective four walls of the private home where people can live however they chose to. The public sphere is essential insofar as it is where human beings are seen and recognized by others. For Arendt, human existence becomes meaningful in public, and it is precisely from this sphere that the stateless and the masses were excluded.

This loss of meaning resulting from not having a home in the public world constitutes what Arendt calls the “basic experience” (474) of our century. In this regard, Arendt adds to Liebow and Weil’s claim that homelessness is about more than losing the roof over one’s head (as it is also about a spiritual uprootedness) by arguing that homelessness is a modern phenomenon stemming from political uprootedness as well. In this chapter I argue that homelessness originates from political invisibility. For this I turn to three groups Arendt writes about as being indicative of the dangers of living outside of the public world: the Jews, the Boers, and the tribal nations of Europe. The chapter begins by establishing the importance, for Arendt, of public life and how appearing in public provides human being with a home in the world. The chapter then presents a case study of the Jews who never built homes that had a political reality, and instead, established roots only in the private sphere. Next, the chapter moves onto a case study of the tribal nations of Europe. These were the pan movements composed of people who did not obtain the sovereignty of a nation-state because they never developed roots beyond their common ethnic consciousness. With no political institutions or enduring cultural achievements that they could claim, pan movements proclaimed their innate superiority on mystical bases, which rejected others’ claim to human dignity and made it impossible to build a common world. The chapter then looks at the Boers who led their lives completely divorced from the public sphere by isolating themselves and never working to produce anything of their own making.

### ***1. At home in public***

One of the key concepts of Arendt’s thinking is the ‘political’, which is to say public life. Humans create the public as a space in which they can act, speak and create a common world together. To act is “to take initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, 'to begin,' 'to lead,' and eventually 'to rule' indicates), to set something in motion. Because they are *initium*, newcomers



and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.” (Arendt *The Human Condition* 177). Every human being has the ability to make new beginnings. For Arendt, freedom is enabled by this capacity to initiate, and this freedom is exercised through action, in public (Thuma). By acting together in the public realm, men create a common and enduring world that provides them with a home.

The public realm is also a source of power, as “power always comes from men acting together” (Arendt *Origins* 474). When men act in concert and create a common world, they develop a common language and understanding that allows them to make claims about their human and political rights. They gain the power of recognition and agency, as the public realm makes it possible for man to appear before others. This appearance has existential effects insofar as Arendt views the public space as a kind of “stage” for the short-lived “performances” of the individual, which protects against the impermanence of human existence (Thuma). It is a space where one’s actions and words are seen and remembered. The public gives a reality and durability to human life, and to the world.

The danger of leading a non public life is invisibility, which is to live a life that is without consequences and remains “excluded from the light of the public realm where excellence can shine” (Arendt, *On Revolution* 59). When one is invisible they lose the ability to act, “the relevance of speech” (Arendt 297) and “human relationships” (Arendt 297), and are therefore deprived “of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective.” (Arendt *Origins* 296). To live only in the social sphere is also a form of invisibility because the social is ruled by discrimination, which is to say that it is where people come together and form groups based on likeness and common interests (Arendt, *Reflections on Little Rock* 51). This conflicts with the public sphere’s principle of equality and drive to build of a common world, as

a unitary whole. When one lives only in the social realm, they can build a common world but only with certain people. A life led exclusively in the private sphere is another form of invisibility because one's private world does not concern others. In private, actions cannot make themselves observable to others. The private is where one retreats from the public and the social.

## 2. *The Jews*

“[...] Jewish history, the history of a people without a government, without a country, and without a language.”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

In part one of the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Antisemitism”, Hannah Arendt writes the story of the Jews of Europe. For Arendt, the Jews were indicative of a group that did not establish a public identity and for this reason, had no power to resist the evils of totalitarianism. At the core of the Jews' history is “a people without a government, without a country, and without a language.” (Arendt 8) that settled in inhospitable environments (Abbarno 227). Without a country of their own to define them territorially, or a government to represent and protect them, or a language that was the product of having a space in which to appear and speak, the Jews lacked “political ability and judgment” (Arendt 8). They never developed the skills developed in public and were therefore, “politically naïve” (Nye 155).

Instead of consolidating a group identity in public, the Jews relied on a special protected status (outside of politics) provided to them by the state. In the late seventeen century, the state found itself needing a considerable amount of credit to expand its sphere of economic influence. The Jews who were known for their age-old experience as moneylenders, were the only group in Europe to agree to financially support the state. Doing so meant that they were also the only group to tie its destiny to the state's development (Arendt 17). In return for the Jews' financial aid, the state granted them “special protection” (Arendt 13) in the form of privileges. Granting

the Jews privileges was a strategic move on the part of the state insofar as it compensated the Jews for their services, but also prevented them from assimilating with the rest of the population, which was hostile to the state (Arendt 13). From that moment on, the Jews' place in society was increasingly defined by their relationship to the state and therefore, by exception.

This special relationship with the state prevented the Jews from "submersion in the class system as well as their own establishment as a class." (Arendt 13) and set them apart from the rest of society. By relying only on their ties with the state to preserve their group identity, the Jews existed outside the public realm and outside the class system. Since the body politic the Jews were defined by "had not other social reality, they were socially speaking, in the void" (Arendt 14). The rest of society became skeptical of the Jews' alliance with the state and perceived it as "self-preservation and group survival" (Arendt 13).

The Jews' reliance on high authority not only excluded them from society, but also prevented them from developing political knowledge or practice. The Jews were the group with the most ties to the body politic and yet, with the least political interest. The Jews' lack of political life kept them outside the public sphere, which meant that they did not have the practice of appearing and being seen by others. This lack of practice resulted in the Jews never cultivating agency for purposes of self-defense (Arendt 24). Their aloofness from society and political ignorance made them blind to "the moment when social discrimination changed into a political argument" (Arendt 25). The classes that had been in conflict with the state all became antisemitic because the Jews were the only group that represented the state. When German politics turned against the Jews, they had no say in the political process and no grounds to fight for their rights since they had never gained visibility and power by establishing themselves in public.

The Jews could have gained power from the fact that they were “an inter-European element” (Arendt 19) with inter-European connections and credit at their disposal. However, they did not use this advantageous position to achieve purposes of their own (Canovan 46). The Jews never formed an organized “international financial entity” (Arendt 16) and repetitively neglected chances for “normal capitalist enterprise and business” (Arendt 14). Instead, it was the “bonds of blood and family ties” (Arendt 27) that connected the dispersed pockets of Jews across Europe. Aside from their state defined status, the Jews determined their place in the world exclusively in the private realm. Doing well economically and with the state behind them, the Jews lived comfortably in private and did not feel the need to be politically responsible (Canovan 52). Without a place in public though, the common world they built was a private one that no political reality. For Arendt, the Jews’ apolitical behavior and reliance on the state was their downfall, as it made it easy for states to make them superfluous when politics turned against them. Since the Jews were not politically aware and had not built a home in public, they had no agency to fight the loss of their place in the world.

### ***3. The tribal nations of Europe***

“Rootlessness was the true source of that “enlarged tribal consciousness” which actually meant that members of these peoples had no definite home but felt at home wherever other members of their “tribe” happened to live.”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Tribal nationalism emerged amongst the migrating populations resulting from Austria-Hungary and Czarist Russia’s constantly changing borders. Pan-German and pan-Slavic movements were the coming together of peoples who, because they had always been on the move, had not struck deep enough roots in their respective nations to participate in national emancipation. In other words, they had not established a public world that was recognized and valued by others.

Tribalism became the nationalism of the “suppressed minorities like the Slavs in Austria and the Poles in Czarist Russia.” (Arendt 228) who were denied emancipation and the sovereignty of a nation-state (Arendt 227).

Nations were emancipated and became nation-states when they “entered the scene of history and [...] acquired a consciousness of themselves as cultural and historical entities, and of their territory as a permanent home” (Arendt 229). To become a nation-state a nation had to reflect a binding history and identity that came out of having a place in the world. The pan movements did not enter the scene of history because their nationality had not “yet developed beyond the inarticulateness of ethnic consciousness” (Arendt 231). Moreover, their languages remained a dialect and they failed to develop a strong attachment to the land (Arendt 231).

For Arendt, the tribal nations of Europe come out of this “atmosphere of rootlessness” (232) - an atmosphere marked by the absence of a common cultural identity and of a definite home. Instead of deriving a sense of meaning and place by building a common world, the pan movements relied on clan-shared traits. Their home was wherever other members of the “tribe” (232) were. The pan-German and pan-Slavic movements’ adherents “had not the slightest idea of the meaning of *patria* or patriotism” (Arendt 232) and “could only point to themselves” (Arendt 232) as the basis of their place in the world. Consequently, these peoples’ national quality “appeared to be much more of a portable private matter, inherent in their very personality, than a matter of public concern and civilization.” (Arendt 231).

With no political institutions or enduring cultural achievements that they could claim, pan movements proclaimed the innate superiority of their German or Slavic “souls” (Arendt 232; Tsao 125), which resulted in claims of absolute chosenness based on belonging to “the people singled out for divine origin” (Arendt 233). Their national quality fell back on some “mysterious

inherent psychological or physical quality” (Arendt 240), which rejected the idea of a common origin for Man. Pan movements transformed into “completely uprooted, racially indoctrinated hordes” (Arendt 242) that escaped mankind’s “common sharing of responsibility” (Arendt 235). It was impossible for the tribal nations of Europe to be at home in the reality they had constructed – a reality in which only the “rules of the animal kingdom [could] possibly apply to its political destinies” (Arendt 235), and which therefore rejected others’ claim to human dignity.

#### **4. *The Boers***

“[the Boers’] fantastic treks, [...] showed clearly that they had transformed themselves into a tribe and lost the European’s feeling for a territory, a *patria* of their own. They behaved exactly like the black tribes who had also roamed the Dark Continent for centuries – feeling at home wherever the horde happened to be, and fleeing like death every attempt at definite settlement.”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

The Boers were descended from Dutch colonists who had settled at the Cape of Hope after 1652 when the Dutch East India Company established a staging post there. They were “the first European group to become completely alienated from the pride which Western man felt in living in a world created and fabricated by himself.” (Arendt 194). The Boers’ lifestyle was completely divorced from Western traditions and from a public world. They rejected the belief that man “can produce equality through organization [...] and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals.” (Arendt 301).

The Boers’ living conditions in the African wilderness “escaped the reality of civilization” (Arendt 190) and of a “human-built world” (Arendt 197) primarily because they lived in total isolation. The extremely bad soil made it impossible to build settlements and reproduce the village organization of their homeland. As a result, the Boers opted to live separate from one another. Isolated by broad spaces of wilderness (Arendt 191), they quickly “lost both their peasant relationship to the soil and their civilized feeling for human fellowship” (Arendt 193).

Instead of developing an organized community, the Boers followed a kind of “clan organization” (Arendt 191). There was no body politic, no communal organization, and no territory definitely colonized for the Boers to form an identity around (Arendt 193). The fact that they were Boers and shared a language was their only defining trait. Their human self-consciousness - similarly to the tribal nations of Europe - did not derive from “their status as expressions of capacities common to all human beings” (Tsao 123), but rather from an externally determined fact about themselves. Arendt’s account of the Boers’ rapid degeneration from a civilized people into a ‘clan’ shows that any attempt to ground one’s human dignity on a contingent trait like ethnic descent or the color of one’s skin prevents the most basic human capacity for action and the creation of a common built world (Tsao 122).

The Boers’ rootlessness and lack of a home in the public world was “a natural result of early emancipation from work” (Arendt 197) and “contempt for labor” (Arendt 193). Work and labor are of key importance in Arendt’s understanding of public life, as work produces permanent things to make up the human world (such as works of art and furniture), and labor produces what man needs to survive (such as food) (Franeck). Lazy and unproductive, the Boers rejected both work and labor. They never made the effort to mold their surroundings into a human landscape and create a sense of stability. The Boers deserted the soil as soon as crops no longer gave and the animals had all been hunted. This meant that they were continually on the move, and never built permanent dwelling places. In fact, they would abandon their homes and farms at the slightest provocation and go deeper into the interior wilderness of the country (Arendt 194). The Boers’ great treks further inland became their way of life.

The Boers depended entirely on slavery for productivity. However, only a small portion of the African tribes was enslaved and as a result, the slave labor barely sufficed to keep the Boers alive

(Arendt 193). Having no interest in achieving an organized and sustainable way of living, they preferred to move whenever natural resources ran out and to have no attachments. For Arendt, the Boers' "vegetat[ive]" (Arendt 19) existence and ruling over the African tribes in "absolute lawlessness" (Arendt 193) destroyed their sense of human purpose and responsibility, making it impossible for them to build a home in a common world.

Arendt draws a parallel between the Boers' way of life and that of the native African tribes who lived in "hostile nature" (190). The African tribes "treated nature as their undisputed master" (Arendt 192) and behaved like they were a part of it. Their world of nature had no human reality because they never created a human world out of it through action. Instead, the African tribes would flee as soon as nature no longer yielded what they needed - a habit the Boers came to imitate. The African tribes' way of life, Arendt argues, seemed to lack the "specifically human character" that comes with building a "specifically human reality" (Arendt 192). Because they had nothing permanent to claim their identity, the African tribes existed "without the future of a purpose and the past of an accomplishment" (Arendt 190).

By drawing a parallel between the Boers and the African tribes, Arendt shows that the Boers reverted to a "natural" (Arendt 192), pre-political way of life. The Jews, the Boers, and the tribal nations of Europe exemplify the danger of becoming superfluous as a result of not being rooted in a political community. These three groups, like the stateless and the masses, became superfluous: the Nazis exterminated the Jews; the British put the Boers in concentration camps; and the tribal nations of Europe disappeared.



## Chapter IV

### *Refugee camps: spaces of homelessness*

“refugee camps (...) often become places where people are born and die waiting to go home.”  
- Alessandro Petti, “Architecture of Exile”

The stateless people's rightlessness, the masses' spiritual disconnectedness, and the Jews, Boers and tribal nations of Europe's political invisibility led them to be homeless in different ways. The stateless experienced homelessness as a form of isolation; the masses experienced it as a form of loneliness; and the Jews, the Boers, and the tribal nations of Europe experienced it as a form of powerlessness. Moreover, the origins of homelessness identified in the first three chapters of this project reveal that to be homeless is to be meaningless.

For Arendt, the stateless, the masses, the Jews, the Boers and the tribal nations of Europe were indicative of meaninglessness, as they had all, in one way or another, lost their place in the world. However, she predicted that the stateless - whose condition she believed to be identical to that of refugees (279) - in particular would become “the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics.” (277). Contemporary politics, Arendt argues, are marked by the discrepancy between human rights being inalienable and enjoyed only by citizens belonging to a state, and the situation of displaced people, who lose the protection of their rights (Arendt 279) because they have no legal rights as citizens. If contemporary politics are characterized by a human rights paradox that leaves those who do not belong to a political community homeless, then displaced people are indeed symptomatic of them. Devoid of a place to call home, shorn of rights, cut off from ties to others, and denied a political identity, displaced people become

homeless; and the roughly fifty-nine point five million forcibly displaced people in the world today (UNHCR) are a clear indication of the overwhelming homelessness of our age.

Faced with “homelessness on an unprecedented scale, [and] rootlessness to an unprecedented depth.” (Arendt viii), we must ask how this phenomenon is being dealt with. What is the response to mass homelessness? What becomes of refugees? For Arendt, internment camps have become “the routine solution” (279), “the only practical substitute for a nonexistent homeland” (284); an indisputable claim when faced with the fact that over thirty-four million people live in refugee camps across the world today (UNHCR). In this chapter I argue that refugee camps are spatial manifestations of homelessness. Moreover, I argue that camps are a solution to the refugee problem that does not change refugees’ homeless condition; in fact, refugee camps leave it in limbo. The chapter begins by placing the emergence of refugee camps within the larger history of camps as modern spaces of confinement for bothersome populations who do not fit the framework of the law. Next, the chapter moves onto the key characteristics of refugee camps and how these mirror the tripartite origins of homelessness. Refugee camps are spaces of exception that are geographically marginalized. Completely isolated, they are excluded from the normal order and deprived of public, social and private life. The chapter then looks at different architectural attempts at challenging the homelessness of refugee camps.

### *1. Understanding the camp*

#### **a) A century of camps**

Originating from the Latin word *campus* meaning “level ground”, the term ‘camp’ is a reference to the Campus Martius of Ancient Rome where practices such as athletics and military drills took place (Grbac 6). In the modern day, the purpose of camps has changed significantly, as they have become the preferred means of containing unwanted populations. The Cuban camps

in which the Spanish put thousands of Cuban civilians during the War of Independence (1895-98) were arguably the first camps to exist (Agamben 166, Kreienbaum 897). Following the Cuban camps were those created by the British during the second Anglo-Boer War in South Africa (1899-1902), in which the Boers were “concentrated” (Agamben 166). Shortly afterward, during the Herero Wars (1904-1908), the German Empire created concentration camps to rid German South-West Africa (modern-day Namibia) of the Herero tribe (Grbas 9). Arising after 1929 were the Soviet forced labor camp systems known as ‘Gulag’. Around the same time, the Nazis created the most extreme form of camps. These were the concentration and extermination camps in which mainly Jews and Soviet prisoners of war were sent.

This brief history of the origins of camps shows that although they differed in purpose, - ranging from containing displaced populations, via forced labor, to extermination - they have become an essential part of modern history (Kreienbaum 896). So much so that Zygmunt Bauman views the twentieth century “the ‘Age of camps’ ” (Bauman 267) and Giorgio Agamben claims camps have become the “ ‘nomos’ of the modern” (Agamben 166). For Bauman, nothing was more “unexpected than Auschwitz and the Gulag, and none could be more bewildering, shocking and traumatic” (Bauman 267). The shadows cast by the scientifically designed and administered killing of human beings in Auschwitz and the Gulag “seem by far the longest and likely to dominate any picture we may paint.” (Bauman 267).

In his famous work, *Homo Sacer*, Agamben also roots the concept of the camp in the horrors that took place in the camps of the Holocaust. Similarly to Bauman, Agamben believes that these camps created a particular type of space where people’s lives were regarded as worthless, and could therefore be killed with impunity (Robinson). This is where the figure of *homo sacer* comes into play: “homo” means “human”/”man” and “sacer” means “sacred” and taboo”. *Homo*

*sacer* is the one who can be killed but not sacrificed to the Gods because they are defined outside what is recognized as valued life and not worth sacrificing (Robinson) - in Arendt's terms, *homo sacer* is the superfluous person. For Agamben, the camp as a space of confinement for populations that have become superfluous originates particularly from the Nazi camps but is not limited to them. In fact, the reason why the camp has become "the nomos of the political space in which we are still living" (166), he argues, is because "we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed and whatever its denomination and specific topography." (174). For Agamben, camps are ever present whether it be the Bari stadium into which the Italian police in 1991 temporarily placed illegal Albanians before deporting them, or the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris where the Vichy authorities held Jews before handing them over to the German, or the *zones d'attentes* in French international airports where people asking for refugee status are detained (Agamben 174).

The danger of being declared *homo sacer* is built into the experience of life in societies ruled by states (Robinson), and "signals the political space of modernity itself" (Agamben 174). Camps, he argues, are "produced at the point at which the political system of the modern nation-state (...) enters into a lasting crisis." (Agamben 174-5). Similarly to Arendt's writing on statelessness, Agamben sees the nation-state being founded on the bond between "a determinate localization (land) and a determinate order (the State) and mediated by automatic rules for the inscription of life (birth or the nation)" (Agamben 175) as problematic.

Faced with people who do not fit this framework and challenge the "old *nomos*" (Agamben 175), states decide to "assume directly the care of the nation's biological life as one of its tasks." (Agamben 175). This means the state has the sovereignty of "recognition and derecognition"

(Robinson) of human life, and that those judged to be anomalies or problems are excluded.

Modern states have created the camp as “the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order” (175). Agamben provides Yugoslavia as a contemporary example to support his argument that the breakdown of the nation-state has led to the “dislocation of populations and human lives along entirely new lines of flight” and that the camp is “the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet.” (Agamben 176). Those who are excluded and placed in camps become *homo sacer* because they enter “a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit” (Agamben 170). Operating outside the normal order, the camps suspends a person’s identity and rights - concepts such as “subjective right and juridical protection” (Agamben 170) lose their meaning. This loss of “political status [...] reduce[s] to bare life” (Agamben 171).

#### **b) The ever-present danger of the Nazi concentration camps**

Arendt argues that camps are “the most consequential institution of totalitarian rule” (Arendt 441). They are methods of “total domination” (Arendt 438) that reflect the belief that “everything is possible” (Arendt 437) - that a world of utter monstrosity can be created. According to her, there are three types of concentration camps. The first are “DP camps, which are nothing other than camps for persons who have become superfluous and bothersome” (Arendt 445). These are the “mildest forms” (Arendt 445) of concentration camps where people such as refugees and the stateless are placed. The second are the “Soviet Union’s labor camps” (Arendt 445). Finally, there are the camps created by the Nazis, which she writes are equivalent to “Hell” (445). At the core of the camp as a concept are “human masses sealed off [...] [and] treated as if they no longer exist” (Arendt 445). When one has lost their home in the world and become superfluous, the only solution is camps. The ‘mildest’ consequence of homelessness is

internment camps, and the severest is the Nazi concentration camps, which, because they are part of history, are an ever-present danger.

These camps not only “degrade[d] human beings, but also serve[d] as the ghastly experiment of eliminating [...] spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing” (Arendt 438). The Nazi camps destroyed humans’ virtue of birth, namely, the ability to create beginnings and act. In other words these camps not only contained superfluous people, but also made sure that these people’s superfluoussness was absolute. This was done in three steps. First, the “juridical person in man” (Arendt 447) was killed. To kill the juridical person in man is to create a person who is no longer a legal person; to create a person who no longer has rights. The Nazis did so by continuously arresting and imprisoning people “arbitrar[ily]” (Arendt 449). The fact that one’s presence in the camp had absolutely no “connections with some definitive actions” (Arendt 449) created a space “outside the protection of the law” (Arendt 447), where everyone and anyone could be sent. In the face of arbitrariness, hanging onto one’s rights becomes useless. The Nazi concentration camps destroyed man’s rights not only by making him rightless, but also by making him believe that his right to claim rights was worthless. The killing of the juridical man is the “prerequisite” (Arendt 451) for total domination.

The second step was “the murder of the moral person in man” (Arendt 452). This was done by “making death anonymous” (Arendt 452). Human beings’ deaths were robbed of their “meaning as the end of a fulfilled life” (Arendt 452). Once a person was rightless and deprived of meaning, total domination was “really total” (Arendt 452), and it was possible to kill man’s “unique identity” (Arendt 453), which is to say man’s “spontaneity” (Arendt 453). When human beings’ ability to begin something new is destroyed, they are so dehumanized that they become

“marionettes” (Arendt 453). For Arendt, “the danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with [...] homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous” (459).

## **2. Extraterritoriality, exception and exclusion**

In the final chapter of *Homo Sacer*, “The Camp as the ‘Nomos’ of the Modern”, Agamben tries to answer the question “What is a camp” (166). Looking at the very first camps created by the Spanish in Cuba and those in which the English put the Boers, Agamben determines the initial characteristics of the camp, namely, “a state of emergency linked to a colonial war” (Agamben 166) and “a state of exception and martial law” (Agamben 167). This is echoed in the Nazi *Lager* where the juridical basis for internment was not common law but “*Schutzhaft* (literally, protective custody)” (Agamben 167). This measure made it possible for people to be taken into custody regardless of any criminal behavior and simply on the considerations of “danger to the security of the state” (Agamben 167). The first concentration camps in Germany were those run by the Social Democratic governments that interned communist militants and Eastern European Jews in the “*Konzentrationslager für Ausländer*” (Agamben 167) (concentration camp for foreigners), both on the basis of *Schutzhaft*.

Agamben argues, “the nexus between the state of exception and the concentration camp” (168) is key in understanding the nature of the camp because “*The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule.*” (168-9). Although camps are meant to be only temporary states of exception, they are given a “permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order” (Agamben 169) and creates “the paradoxical status as a space of exception”. In other words, the camp is an exceptional space that is both “outside the normal juridical order” (Agamben 170) and inside of it because “what is first

taken into the juridical order is the state of exception itself.” (Agamben 170). As a result, the difference between the normal order and the state of exception is blurred and the camp becomes “*a hybrid of law and fact in which the two terms have become indistinguishable.*” (Agamben 170).

Agamben’s analysis of the camp leads him to define it as the “materialization of the state of exception and (...) the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction.” (174). His analysis of the camp strongly echoes French anthropologist Michel Agier’s claim that at the root of the “camp solution” (183) is a socio-spatial organization that aims at distancing and confining the “undesirables” (183), and that this organization is “recognizable by the fact that they combine (...) traits of extraterritoriality, exception and exclusion.” (280). Agier develops his tripartite characterization of spaces of encampment by arguing that refugee camps are “out-places” (*Managing the Undesirables* 180) that are constituted as “*outsides*” (Agier 180). As a result of being placed on the outskirts of local communities, fenced in, and rarely marked on official maps (Turner 3), refugee camps become marginalized spaces. This marginalization sets camps outside the “limits of the normal order of things” (Agier 180), creating a “situation of exception” (Agier 81) and what Agier refers to as the “experience of a double exclusion from locality” (180).

Refugees are excluded not only from their place of origin, but also from the local population where the camp is established (180). As uprooted people who are not integrated into the normal order because of the camps’ state of exception, refugees come to occupy “a subaltern position imposed by the double handicap of not being ‘home’ and being almost totally destitute.” (181). In this regard, refugee camps being exceptional spatial peripheries further accentuate refugees’ homelessness. They live “outside of the places and outside of the time of a common, ordinary



predictable world.” (Agier *Between War and City* 323) as “pariahs”(Agier 28) and “outcasts” (Agier 181).

For the architect Alessandro Petti, the combination of refugee camps being ‘out-places’ and spaces where people occupy a ‘subaltern position’ creates a suspension from the surrounding legal, social and political order, problematizing “the very idea of a city as a functional political community and democratic space.” (Petti “Architecture of Exile”). Petti understands the city as an urban form of human political community where one exercises rights of citizenship (Grbac 3) and like Arendt, he believes that a person’s political identity is exercised and played out in the public space of the city (Petti). In a New York Times article on refugee camps, Michael Kimmelman recounts his conversation with Petti on public spaces. Petti explains how the state of exception of refugee camps eliminates the possibility of a public realm and creates “a void of a political order” (Petti “Architecture of Exile”). Refugee camps are the “anti-city” (Petti) and it is precisely for this reason that refugees have ‘subaltern positions’; because they are stripped of the political rights one obtains and enacts in public (Petti). In Arendt’s words, refugees, like the stateless, lose their “place in a community, [their] political status [...], and the legal personality which makes [their] actions and part of its destiny in a consistent whole” (301).

Deprived of a state of their own and of a political community that guarantees rights, refugees become humanitarian cases (Agier 214) that necessitate a humanitarian space. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and non-governmental organizations are the sovereign power in these spaces, and create what Agier refers to as “humanitarian governments” (201). These humanitarian governments define their own space “as one of exception, a frontier, an out-place” (Agier 213), which is meant to “[treat] and [manage]” (Agier 213) undesirable populations who no longer have any framework in which to exercise their citizenship. Because

humanitarian governance operates under “other legal instruments than the surrounding areas.”

(Turner 3), Agier argues that they act “*against* politics” (Agier 215) insofar as they produce exceptionality and prevent “nameless victims” (Agier 214) from reclaiming a political identity.

Refugees’ loss of political identity and exclusion from the normal order is accentuated by the temporality of refugee camps, which Agier argues is paradoxical. As established by both Agamben and Agier, an emergency situation and its exceptional character justify the creation of refugee camps, and therefore make them temporary spaces. However, time in refugee camps is suspended and becomes long lasting (Agier 71). This is what Petti refers to as “the prolonged exceptional temporality of the refugee camps” (“Architecture of Exile”), and what film director, producer and essayist Eyal Sivan calls the “permanent temporary solution” (“On the Palestinian Refugee Camps as a Permanent Temporary Solution Regime”). As a consequence of this “suspension of time” (Agier 77), refugee camps and life within them are excluded from history (Agier 79). There can be no past or future in refugee camps, only an enduring present. The only meaning that can therefore be ascribed to refugee camps’ “present that never ends” (Agier 78) is “waiting” (Agier 77). Whether it’s waiting to return home, waiting for paper work to be processed, or waiting for the arrival of humanitarian food, everyday life in the camp existence on “‘stand-by’” (Agier 72).

Since camps exist within “a temporal reality [...] that is provisional by definition” (Agier 79) and refugees are “deemed to be waiting only to leave” (Agier 79), there is no history to write and treasure (Agier 79). Moreover, there is no point in building a home when one hopes to return to the one they have lost. The consequence of camps’ suspended temporality echoes the Arendtian consequences of not having a public world. Since time in refugee camps is suspended, it

becomes impossible for refugees to form a consciousness of themselves based on a shared history and place in the world that has any significance outside the space of the camp.

### ***3. Attempts at homemaking***

This temporality paradox coincides with the material construction of refugee camps. Their structures are the scene of an ongoing tension between permanent and definitive settlements (Sivan "On the Palestinian Refugee Camp as a Permanent Temporary Solution Regime"); of an "aesthetic of temporariness" (Abourahme 207). Refugee camps are meant to be materialization of temporary architecture (Petti "Architecture of Exile") and to this effect are most often made of tents and shelters that are designed to be assembled and removed easily, and quickly. However, the indefinite temporality of camps necessarily leads its occupants to try and make the space into a home, in order to live with more dignity (Agier 53). Julia Peteet, an anthropologist who specializes in the study of Palestinian refugee camps, writes that the tent structure in refugee camps becomes a "despised symbol of misery and homelessness" (109), yet at the same time, the move away from tents is a threatening sign of permanence.

Improving the living conditions within refugee camps is a very controversial point. Refugees' homeless is expressed in the precarity and transience of refugee camps' appearance: tents, exposed sewage, etc (Abourahme 207) - camps become the "living archive of displacement" (Abourahme 207). Any move toward "Improving and 'diluting' the camp, blending or integrating it into the surrounding landscape so that it loses its spatial discernability" (Abourahme 207) is seen as giving up on returning. However, both Agier and Peteet have observed that with time, refugees inevitably start building huts and cabins out of mud-brick and wood (Agier 54), and eventually, out of cement. This progression is gradual; first a cement block foundation one to two feet in height is constructed around the perimeter of the tent to protect it

from the rain and drafts, and then, the building moves upward (Peteet 109). The evolution from cloth tents that are foldable and removable, to more concrete structures like cement huts is the material reality of the temporality paradox of refugee camps, and the indication of refugees' search for home amidst homelessness.

Architect Alessandro Petti's work focuses precisely on challenging this idea that any improvement in infrastructure and housing in refugee camps is an erosion of the right to return. He argues that increasingly, "improved living conditions (...) do not necessarily conflict with the right of return. Today, refugees are re-inventing social and political practices that improve their everyday life." (Petti). For Petti, this radical transformation is a positive thing as long as it does not normalize the political condition of being exiled. His most important project that challenges the idea of the camp as a site of marginalization, poverty and political subjugation, is the public space he created with his architect wife, Sandi Hilal, in the Fawwar refugee camp, in the West Bank.

As pointed out in Micheal Kimmelman's latest essay on the importance of public spaces and Petti and Hilal's project, there are no public and private spaces in refugee camps - "Concepts like inside and outside are blurred" ("The Craving for Public Spaces). The idea of creating a public space like Petti and Hilal's plaza was "mostly unheard-of in Palestinian camps across the West Bank." (Kimmelman "Refugees Reshape Their Camp"). The project was initially met with skepticism, as it seemed to conflict with the right of return. After negotiations and five years of work, Fawwar refugee camp's Square opened in 2012. The Square is "the sole, common space in the camp where all people of different ages and genders can have access. A place where women, men, children, young, old can have different activities." (Alhmouz and Alturshan 23). The square

has become a communal space where classes and meetings such as those of the Woman's Center take place, and where community meals are cooked (Alhmouz and Alturshan 57).

Similarly to the square, The Phoenix Cultural Center in Dehesha refugee camp, in the West Bank, challenges the assumption that "as long as refugees [live] in horrible conditions, their suffering [will] pressure the international community to enact their right of return." (Petti "Beyond the State"). The Center is a multi-story social and cultural built on a site originally designed for the construction of a prison. Refugees, through organized demands took over the site, and within a few months built a cultural center instead (Petti). The Phoenix Center "demonstrates the rich social and cultural values of the refugees in exile, and at the same time opens new forms of thinking, fighting, and action for the right of return." (Petti). The community life created by the Center with a hall for meetings and a library, Petti argues, is not to be understood as a sign of refugees forgetting their homes or giving up, but a human response to a dehumanizing situation. It is a way to give refugees agency and the possibility to convene. Agier and Petti both support this claim by underlining that refugees still want to leave the camp "even if they have become places of identity or have a social, cultural, and even possibly political anchoring." (Agier "From Refugees the Ghetto Is Born" 285) and return to their real homes.

It is examples such as the Square in the Phoenix Cultural Center that have brought Agier to witness the "possibility for escape (...), something unexpected in the a present that seems to be the sole beginning and end of time in the waiting zone" (*Managing the Undesirables* 80). With the years, shelters turn into "almost pretty huts" (Agier 80), rudimentary market places appear and critical opinions on confinement "sometimes [transform] into written lists of demands" (Agier 80). However, Agier is more skeptical than Petti and Hilal. According to him, even though these elements prove that social, political and cultural acts can come to exist and

challenge the suspended temporality of refugee camps, “[the] political life that [is] observed there has hardly any other possibility of developing other than provisionally, discreetly or illegally.” (80). For Agier, as long as refugees live in a state of exception, they remain non-citizens and their actions are non-recognizable to the world outside the camp (Agier “From Refuge the Ghetto is Born” 278) - in Arendt’s words, these attempts at homemaking do not have a “human reality” (Arendt 192). In fact, because they take place within a state of exception, she would argue that they are closer to private acts of homemaking.

## Conclusion

When I first began reading about the Syrian refugee crisis, I was struck by the word ‘home’ and the semantic field of destitution it was accompanied by. I remember thinking that at the heart of this crisis is a profound homelessness. When one hears the word ‘homelessness’, what often comes to mind is domestic homelessness. There are many obvious differences between refugees and people living in the streets or in shelters; yet, in both cases, people find themselves without a home. Although the reasons for this loss are different, something in the experience of this loss is shared. These initial thoughts led me to look past homelessness as the lack of a physical dwelling and craft a more complex understanding. I sought the origins of homelessness. The phenomenological approach asks us to understand homelessness beyond its conceptualization, to study how it appears and the way it is given in experience.

In conversation with Hannah Arendt’s writing, specifically *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, I have identified three origins of homelessness. The first origin of homelessness is rightlessness. The stateless people’s rightlessness deprived them from the ability to build a home anywhere in the world. The second origin is spiritual disconnectedness. The masses’ spiritual disconnectedness left them craving for a sense of home in the world. The third origin of homelessness is political invisibility. The Jews, the Boers, and the tribal nations of Europe’s political invisibility made it impossible for their private homes to be recognized. These origins reveal different experiences of homelessness. Rightless, the stateless were no longer recognized as human. Spiritually disconnected, the masses felt as though they no longer had a place in the world. Politically invisible, the Jews, the Boers and the tribal nations of Europe were powerless. Taken together, these three origins show that homelessness is the experience of meaninglessness.

Marked by the making of borders and the formation of nation-states, this century coincides with the rise of refugee camps as the only solution to the emergence of the figure of the refugee. Starting with the refugees of World War I, the last hundred years bear witness to Russian refugees, Armenian refugees, Ethiopian refugees, World War II refugees, Balkan refugees, Palestinian refugees, Rwandan refugees, Afghan refugees, to name just a few. Today, with an overwhelming nine million Syrians seeking refuge (UNHCR), the Syrian refugee crisis has become the worst refugee crisis of our time.

To look at the space of the refugee camp is to look at the physical manifestation of homelessness. There is something extremely powerful about refugee camps being defined spaces that concentrate people who can no longer occupy a space in the world. They are the only solution to homelessness and yet, they perpetuate it by being trapped between the lost homeland and the unpredictable future. Suspended in time, isolated, outside the normal order, and deprived of public and private spaces, refugee camps make it incredibly challenging for refugees to reclaim meaning.

My visit to the Lebach refugee camp sadly confirmed this project's findings. The experience of meaninglessness was overwhelming in the stories that Syrian refugees shared with me. Many of the interviews I conducted echoed those of Elliot Liebow. Certain words used by Sarah, Bernice and Shirley - the three homeless women Liebow interviewed - to describe their experience of homelessness came up almost verbatim in my conversations with refugees. In conclusion to this project, I leave the reader with the words of Fatema, a twenty four year old Syrian refugee whom I interviewed in Lebach:

"I didn't lose only my home. In Syria I left my studies; the future I had started to build for myself; my parents; my friends; a community; traditions; and the feeling that other people 'get me' - that we have a shared history. [...] During my journey through Greece, Macedonia,



Serbia, Hungary, Austria, and finally, Germany I felt like I was not human anymore, like I lost my dignity. I depended on each country to give me a form of identification paper, and even then, I was nothing else but an unwanted 'refugee'. And that's when I got paper work... Most countries I travelled through, I entered and left illegally. [...] When I was in Hungary, the police closed the train station because of the chaos. There weren't hundreds, but thousands of us. We protested and demanded that they reopen the station but they didn't. It's like we had created a mini revolution but it had no voice. They ended up reopening it days later, but only because they wanted to get rid of us. [...] The refugee camp makes you inactive. You're not needed. All you can do is wait. I felt lonely. [...] I've made it to Germany and am being integrated but most Syrians are stuck in Syria or in camps around Syria. [...] I don't feel at home in Germany. But I feel safer. I'm grateful to be here but I feel isolated. It's going to take a long time for me to feel like I'm not the 'other'." (Fatema)

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